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Chapter 1

“An Absurd Reasoning” by Albert Camus —trans. by Hélène Brown



Albert Camus, Library of Congress

About the author...

In 1957 the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Albert Camus whose “clear-sighted earnestness illuminates the problems of the human conscience...” Camus’s background as an Algerian journalist, as an essayist and playwright, as well as his role in the French resis-

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tance during World War II, form the well-spring of his belief in the possibility of the moral life and the consequent triumph of human value in response to the experience of “the absurd.” Camus’ work exemplifies our capacity to impose meaning *vis-à-vis* the desolation of human existence. Although he is thought of as an existentialist, Camus rejected that label because of his devotion to personal moral value. For Camus, morality is not a matter of expediency.

About the work . . .

Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*¹ affirms that only by facing the absurd can I act authentically; otherwise, I adopt a convenient attitude of wishful thinking. Although I cannot count on the consequences of my actions, my life’s meaning comes from seizing awareness of what I do. I must act in the face of meaningless—I must revolt against the absurd—if I am not to despair from the ultimate hopelessness and limitations of my life.

From the reading . . .

“At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of the trees, at this time all lose the illusory meaning with which we used to cloth them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. . . . Just one thing: that thickness and that strangeness of the world, all that is the absurd.”

1. Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* in *Essais*. Paris, Gallimard et Calmann-Lévy, 1965.

Ideas of Interest from *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*

1. Is the question of suicide or the question of the meaning of life the more serious of philosophical questions?
2. Explain how Camus clarifies the genesis of personal crises and the consequent thought of suicide as part of the human condition.
3. Carefully describe how Camus characterizes everyday existence in terms of two fundamentally different ways of *esquive*.
4. Characterize Camus' insights into the origins of the experience of the absurd.
5. Why do you think Camus believes that the universe cannot be understood? Clarify as to why you agree or disagree with his view?
6. Explicate² the experience of the absurd. Does the absurd involve logical, physical, or emotional impossibility?
7. How can a person find meaning in existence when faced with consciousness of the absurd and the ultimate futility of reason?
8. What does it mean to live life without *esquive*? How does conscious revolt restore dignity to life? Is it that meaning comes not from successful personal accomplishment but from human exertion and endeavor?

2. Explication is a clarification of a term in as exact terms as possible and is an account or how the term is informed by other related ideas. Further, often insight into the meaning of the term can be had by informal explanations and examples.

The Reading Selection from *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*

[Suicide and the Meaning of Life]

There is only one truly serious philosophical problem: suicide. To judge whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. The rest—whether the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must answer first. And, if it is true, as Nietzsche claims, that a philosopher should preach by example in order to command respect, one begins to understand the importance of that reply, for it will precede the definitive act. These are truths the heart can feel, yet they must be examined in depth to become clear to the mind.

If I ask myself how to judge that a particular question is more pressing than another, I reply that it is by the actions it entails. I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument. Galileo, who was holding a scientific truth of some importance, abjured it with the greatest ease as soon as it put his life in danger. To some extent, he did the right thing. That truth was not worth the stake. Whether the earth turns around the sun or vice versa does not fundamentally matter. To say it all, the question is futile. On the other hand, I see many people die because they consider that life is not worth being lived. I see others paradoxically being shot dead for the ideas and illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). Thus I judge that the meaning of life is the most pressing of all questions.

[Suicide: Physical and Emotional Aspect]

Suicide has never been dealt with but as a social phenomenon. On the contrary, the matter we are dealing with, at the outset, is that of the relationship of individual thought and suicide. An act like this

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is prepared in the silence of the heart, as is a great work. The man himself knows nothing of it. One evening, he pulls the trigger or he hurls himself into living. Of an apartment-building manager who had killed himself I was told one day that he had lost his daughter five years earlier, that he had changed a lot since then, and that such experience "had sapped" him. One cannot wish for a more exact word. To begin to think is to begin to be sapped. Society has little to do with those beginnings. The worm is in man's heart. It is where it must be sought. One must follow and understand this life-or-death-game that leads a man from facing existence with lucidity to escaping it.

There are many reasons for a suicide, and the most obvious generally are not the most decisive. Suicide is rarely (yet the hypothesis is not excluded) committed out of reflection. What triggers the crisis is almost always unverifiable. Newspapers often speak of "private sorrows" or "incurable illness." These explanations are plausible, still one should know whether a friend of the desperate man had not the very same day talked to him with indifference. That man is the guilty one. For it may be all it takes to well up a lump of bitterness and weariness still in suspension.

However, if it is hard to determine exactly the moment and the subtle process when the mind is opting for death, it is easier to deduce from the act itself the consequences it implies. In a sense, and like in a melodrama, to kill oneself is to confess. It is for a man to confess that life is too much and he does not understand it. Let's not look too closely at such analogies, however, but rather return to common speech. To kill oneself is merely to confess that it "is not worth the trouble." Living, naturally, is never easy. We continue to make the gestures that existence commands for many reasons, the first of which is habit. To die voluntarily supposes that one has recognized, even instinctively, the ludicrous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the pointlessness of suffering.

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Albert Camus’s Home—Lourmarin, France

What, then, is this incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. However, on the contrary, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels a stranger. His exile is without recourse since he is divested of the memory of a lost homeland or of the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, between the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. All sane men, having thought of their own suicide, we can accept without further explanation that a direct link exists between this feeling and a longing for nothingness.

The subject of this essay is precisely the relation between the absurd and suicide, the exact measure in which suicide is a solution to the absurd. The principle can be laid down that for a man who does not cheat, what he believes to be true must be the measuring rule of his action. Belief in the absurdity of existence must then dictate a man’s behavior. It is legitimate to wonder clearly and with no false pathos whether a conclusion of that importance requires that a man should dispose so hurriedly of a situation that he does not understand. >I am thinking, of course, of men who are willing to be in harmony with their true selves.

[Esquive]

In the attachment of a man to his life, there is something stronger than all the miseries in the world. The body’s judgment is as good as the mind’s, and the body recoils from annihilation. We get into the habit of living before we acquire that of thinking. In that race which every day rushes us headlong to death, the body maintains its incorrigible advance. In all, this contradiction rests in essence in what I shall call *esquive*³ because it is both less and more than diversion in the Pascalian sense. The deadly *esquive* that constitutes the third theme of this essay is hope. Either hoping to live another life they must “merit” as some people believe or cheating as done by others who live not for life itself but rather for some greater idea that transcends it, exalts it, gives it a meaning and betrays it.

Absurd Walls

[The Feeling of Absurdity]

All great deeds and all great thoughts have ludicrous beginnings. Great works are often born at a street corner or in the revolving door of a restaurant. So it is of absurdity. The absurd world more than others derives its nobility from that pitiable birth. In certain situations, when asked what he is thinking, a man who replies “nothing” may be feigning. People who are loved know it well. But if this man’s reply is sincere, if it represents that odd state of the soul where the void becomes eloquent, where the chain of daily gestures is broken, where the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again, then his reply is like the first sign of absurdity.

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Getting up, tramway, four hours in the office or in the factory, meal, tramway, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday,

3. *Esquive*: A clever way of escaping the essential.

Friday, Saturday according to the same rhythm, that path is followed easily most of the time. Except that one day, the Why arises, and everything begins in that weariness tinged with surprise. “Begins”—this is important. Weariness comes at the end of those actions performed in a mechanical life, but it inaugurates *conscience* and simultaneously starts its impulse.⁴ Weariness awakes *conscience* and sets the rest onward. The rest is either the unconscious return to the chainlike life or the complete awakening. At the end of the awakening, with time comes the consequence: suicide or re-adaptation. In itself weariness has something sickening. Here, I must admit that it is good. For everything begins with *conscience*, and nothing is worth anything except through it. There is nothing original about these remarks. However, they are evident; consequently we have enough, for a while, to go on with a preliminary survey of the origins of the absurd. “Anxiety” alone is the source of everything.

From the reading ...

“Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in himself should make him reject it. That revolt of the flesh, that is the absurd.”

Likewise and through every day of a lusterless life, time assumes us in its passing. However, comes always a moment when we must assume it. We live in the future: “tomorrow,” “later on,” “when you are settled,” “you will see when you are older.” Such irrelevancies are admirable since they are dealing with death after all. Yet a day

4. The use of the term *conscience* is to be understood as one of several various meanings: (1) *Conscience* as “perceptive *conscience*” is the apprehension of sensory impressions or the spontaneous knowledge of thoughts and actions in everyday life. (2) *Conscience* as reflective *conscience* or consciousness, a result of attending to perceptive *Conscience*. (3) *Conscience* as self-consciousness or as consciousness of reflective *conscience*. In this sense, *conscience* is a higher level of consciousness or awareness. (4) *Conscience* as moral *conscience* or conscience, the moral sense or “inner voice” of right and wrong.

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comes when a man notices or says he is thirty. Thus he is asserting his youth. But he also assumes himself in relation to time. He takes his place within it. He recognizes that he is at a certain stage on a curve that he confesses he will have to travel to its end. He belongs to time, and in that horror that assails him, he recognizes his worst enemy. Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in himself should make him reject it. That revolt of the flesh, that is the absurd.

From the reading...

“Through the death-like lighting of our destiny, pointlessness becomes visible. No moral rules, no effort whatsoever are *a priori* justifiable in the face of the gory mathematics that command our human condition.”

Not long after comes a feeling of strangeness: perceiving that the world is “thick,” sensing to what point a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, how intensely nature or a landscape can negate us. At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees, at this very moment, all lose the illusory meaning with which we used to cloth them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. The primitive hostility of the world rises up again through millennia. For a moment, we no longer understand the world because for centuries we understood only the images and the designs we were presumably placing in it; henceforth, it has become too much for us to make use of that artifice. The world evades us since it becomes itself again. That scenery masked by habit returns to what it really is. It withdraws at a distance from us. Just as there are days when under the familiar face of a woman, we see a stranger for the one we had loved months and years ago, perhaps a time will come when we even desire what makes us suddenly so lonely. However, the time has not yet come. Just one thing: that thickness and that strangeness of the world, all that is the absurd.

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Men, too, secrete the inhuman. At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of men's gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything surrounding them. A man is talking behind a glass enclosure; we cannot hear him, but we see his pointless mimicking. We wonder why he lives. Our discomfort in the face of the inhumanity of man himself, our incalculable fall at perceiving the image of what we are, our "nausea," as a writer of our time calls it, that is also the absurd. Likewise, the stranger who, at certain moments, comes up to us in a mirror, the familiar yet disquieting brother we recognize in our own photographs, that, too, is the absurd.



The Cemetary, Algiers, Algeria, Library of Congress

At last, I am ready to deal with the subject of death and the sense we have of it. In this regard, everything has been said, and it is only decent to avoid pathos. Yet no one is over-surprised that people live as if no one "knew." It is because there is in reality no experience of death. Literally, something is experienced only if it has been lived and made conscious. For that matter, it is hardly possible to talk about the experience of the deaths of others. It is a substitute, a misapprehension, and it never totally convinces us. This conventional melancholy cannot be very persuasive. The horror comes in reality

from the mathematical aspect of the event. If time frightens us, it is because first comes the demonstration, then afterwards the solution. All the flowery speeches about the soul will be conclusively proved otherwise, at least for a while. From that inert body on which a slap no longer makes a mark, the soul vanished. Such elementary and conclusive side of the adventure is the very substance of the absurd feeling. Through the death-like lighting of our destiny, pointlessness becomes visible. No moral rules, no effort whatsoever are *à priori* justifiable in the face of the gory mathematics that command our human condition.

From the reading ...

"... the feeling of absurdity is not born of a fact or of an impression being merely examined, but that it bursts from the comparison between a fact and a certain reality, or between an action and the world that transcends it. The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither one of the two elements compared. It is born of their confrontation."

[Desire for Unity and Clarity]

Whatever may be the play on words and the acrobatics of logic, to understand is above all to unify. The deepest desire of the mind, even in its most elaborate operations, encounters the unconscious feeling of man in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity and an appetite for clarity. To understand the world is for a man to reduce it to the human, to stamp it with his seal. The cat's universe is not the universe of the ant hill. The truism "All thought is anthropomorphic" has no other meaning. Likewise, the mind that seeks to understand reality finds itself satisfied only by being able to reduce it to terms of thought. If man realized that the universe too actually can love and suffer the same as he does, he would be reconciled. If thought would ever discern in the shifting mirrors of

phenomena eternal relations that might sum them up and be themselves subsumed in a single principle, then we could properly speak of intellectual happiness of which the myth of the blessed would only be a ludicrous imitation. That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama. But just because that nostalgia exists does not imply that it must be immediately appeased. For if, bridging the void that separates desire from conquest, we assert with Parmenides the reality of the One (whatever it may be), we fall in the ridiculous contradiction of a mind that asserts total unity and proves by its very assertion its own difference and the diversity it claimed to resolve. We have another vicious circle that alone can stifle our hopes.

[The Mind and the Universe]

Hence the intelligence, too, tells me in its own way that the world is absurd. Its opposite, blind reason, may well maintain that all is clear; nevertheless, I was looking for proof and wishing that reason were right. But despite so many centuries of excessive claims and over the heads of many eloquent and persuasive men, I know that it is false. In these terms at least, there is no happiness if I cannot know. That universal reason, whether practical or moral, that determinism, those categories that explain everything can make an honest man laugh. They have nothing to do with the mind. They negate its profound truth, which is to be shackled. In this unintelligible and limited universe, man's fate henceforth assumes its meaning. A horde of irrationals has sprung up and surrounds him until his ultimate end. Having regained lucidity, which now is also well focused, man's sentiment of the absurd becomes clear and precise. I was saying that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable; that is all one can say. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and of the wild inward desire of clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. It is all, for now, what links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld beings.

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That is all I can perceive clearly in this boundless universe where I pursue my adventure. Let us pause here. If I hold to be true that absurdity that governs my relations with life, if I become imbued with this feeling that seizes me in the face of the grandiose sights of the world, with this lucidity that is imposed on me by the pursuit of a science, then I must sacrifice everything to these certainties and I must look at them fixedly to be able to keep them as such. Above all, I must adapt, like using a sliding rule, my conduct on them and pursue them in all their consequences. I am speaking here of honesty. But I want to know beforehand if thought can live in those deserts.



General View from Mustapha, I, Algiers, Algeria, Library of Congress

[Human Nostalgia and Inhuman Silence]

All these experiences agree and confirm one another. Having reached its most outward limits, the mind must make a judgment and choose its conclusions. There stand the suicide and the reply. But I want to reverse the order of the inquiry and start out from the intellectual adventure and then come back to everyday life. The experiences I am evoking were born in the desert where we must remain. We must at least know how far they extend. In the stance of his effort, man encounters the irrational. He feels with all his senses his inward desire for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between man's call and the irrational silence of the world. This is what we must not forget. We must have a good

grip on it because the consequence of an entire life may emerge from it. We have together the irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that springs up from their encounter; the three characters of the drama that must necessarily end with all the logic of which an existence is capable.

Philosophical Suicide [Existential Philosophers]

[The Absurd as Confrontation and Divorce]

If I accuse an innocent man of a monstrous crime, if I tell a virtuous man that he coveted his own sister, he will reply that it is absurd. His indignation has a comical aspect of its own. But it has also its fundamental reason. The virtuous man illustrates by his reply the conclusive antinomy that exists between the act I am attributing to him and his lifelong principles. "It is absurd" means "It is impossible" but also "It is contradictory." If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine guns, I shall think that his action is absurd. But it is solely by virtue of the disproportion between his intent and the reality he can expect, or of an existing contradiction I see between his true resource and the aim he has in view. Likewise, we shall judge a verdict is absurd by contrasting it to the verdict the facts apparently dictated. Still likewise, >one does the demonstration as *reductio ad absurdum* by comparing the consequences of the reasoning process with the logical reality to be established. In all these cases, from the simplest to the most complex, the absurdity will be all the more significant as the distance grows wider between the two terms of the comparison. There are absurd marriages, challenges, rancors, silences, wars, and even peace agreements. For each of them, the absurdity springs from a comparison. Therefore, I am justified to say that the feeling of absurdity is not born of a fact or of an impression being merely examined, but that it bursts from the

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comparison between a fact and a certain reality, or between an action and the world that transcends it. The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither one of the two elements compared. It is born of their confrontation.

From the point of view of intelligence, I can therefore say that the absurd is not in man (if such a metaphor could have meaning), nor in the world, but rather in their presence together. For now, it is the only link that binds them together. If I want to stick to these truths only, I know what man wants, I know what the world offers him, and now I can say that I know also what binds them. There is no need to go any deeper. A single certainty is enough for a man who tries to find out. He simply has to draw all the consequences from that certainty...

[Absurd as Paradox]

And carrying this absurd logic to its conclusions, I must admit that this wrestling match with the absurd implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a constant refusal (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to the restlessness of the young). Everything that destroys, skips, or conjures away these requirements (and, to begin with, consent which destroys divorce) ruins the absurd and depreciates the attitude that may then be suggested. The absurd has meaning only in so far as we do not agree to it.

There is an evident fact that seems utterly moral: a man is always a prey to his truths. Once they have been accepted, he cannot free himself from them. He does have to pay something. A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it. A man with no hope and consciousness of it, no longer lives for the future. That is natural. But it is just as natural that he should strive to escape the universe of which he is the creator. All the foregoing has significance only on account of this paradox.

Wanting to touch on the works of existential philosophers only, I observe that all of them, without exception, suggest escape. Through a peculiar way of reasoning—starting out from the absurd that emerges from under the rubble of a decaying reason, in a tightly bound universe limited to the human, they all defy the very thing that crushes them, finding a reason for hoping in exactly what impoverishes them. This hope is contrived and of religious nature in all of them. It deserves our attention.

From the reading...

“All things considered, a determined soul will always manage.”

[Living in Despair]

Given the state of the absurd, the problem is to live in it. I know on what it rests, it is on this mind and this world bracing against each other without being ever able to consummate their embrace. I want to know the rule of life for that state, and what is suggested leaves out its basic principles, negates one of the terms of the painful opposition, and demands that I give up. I ask what is entailed in this condition I recognize is mine; I already know it implies obscurity and ignorance; and I am assured that this ignorance explains everything and that this dark night is my light. However, I find in all that no answer to my intent, and this lyrical exaltation cannot hide the paradox from me. One must therefore turn away. Kierkegaard may shout warning, “If man had no *conscience* of the eternal, if at the bottom of all things there were merely an untamed force of ebullient energy producing everything, both the great and the futile, in the maelstrom of obscure passions; if the bottomless void that nothing can fill lay hidden under all things, then what else were life but despair?” Nevertheless, he is not likely to stop the absurd man. To seek what is true is not to seek what is desirable. If in order to es-

cape the anxious question: "What else were life?" one must, like the donkey, feed on rosy illusions, then the absurd mind, rather than giving into falsehood, will prefer to adopt for himself, with no fear nor trembling, Kierkegaard's reply: "despair." All things considered, a determined soul will always manage.

Absurd Freedom

[Man Heart-Rending Choice of the Absurd]

Now the main thing is done. I hold a few truths that I cannot let go. What I know, what is certain, what I cannot deny, what I cannot reject—this is what counts. I can deny everything of that part of me that lives on vague nostalgias save this longing for unity, my need to solve, this insistence upon clarity and cohesion. I can refute everything in the world that surrounds me, everything that hurts or enraptures me, except this chaos, this chance of a checkmated King and this divine equivalence that rises from anarchy. I do not know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible at the moment to know it. What good to me are meanings if assigned out of my condition? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me, that is what I understand. And these two certainties—my need for absoluteness and unity, and the irreducibility of this world to a rational and reasonable principle—I also know that I cannot reconcile them. What other truth can I accept without lying, without interjecting a hope that I do not have and which means nothing within the limits of my condition?

If I were a tree among trees, cat among animals, this life would have a purpose, or rather there would be no problem, for I should belong to this world. I should *be* this world instead of being in opposition with my whole *conscience* and my claim for familiarity. Reason—however ludicrous it may be—is what sets me against all

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creation. I cannot cancel it with a stroke of a pen. What I believe to be true I must therefore preserve. What seems to me so evident, even against me, I must support. And what is the origin of this conflict, of this hiatus between the world and my mind but *conscience* of it? If I want to maintain it, I can with a perpetually attentive, ever anew *conscience* stretched to utmost tension. This is, for the time being, what I must remember. At this moment, the absurd so evident and yet so difficult to conquer reintegrates into a man’s life and again finds its homeland. At this moment, too, the mind can still decide to leave the arid and dried-up road of lucid effort. That road now meets up with daily life. It encounters the anonymous world of the “One,” but man enters it henceforth armed with his revolt and his clear-sightedness. He has unlearned to hope. He is in the hell of the present—his kingdom at last. All problems take on their sharp edges again. Abstract evidence withdraws in the face of a lyricism of forms and colors. Spiritual conflicts become embodied and return to the pitiable and magnificent shelter of man’s heart. None of them is solved. But all are transfigured. Is one going to die, leap and escape, rebuild a mansion of ideas and forms to one’s own scale? On the contrary, is one going to take on the heart-rending and marvelous wager of the absurd? Let us make a last effort in this regard and draw all our conclusions. The body, the tender feeling of love, creation, actions, human dignity will then resume their places in this senseless world. At last man will again find there the wine of the absurd and the bread of indifference with which he sustains his greatness.

Let us insist again on the method: it is a matter of being obstinate. At some point, along his way, the absurd man is solicited. History lacks in neither religions nor prophets even without gods. He is asked to leap. All he can reply is that he does not quite understand, that it is not evident. He wants to do only what he fully understands. He is told assuredly that this is the sin of pride, but he does not understand the notion of sin. He is told that hell may be his final destination, but he has not enough imagination to visualize such a strange future. He is told that he is losing immortal life, but this seems of little significance. An attempt is made to get him to admit his guilt. He feels within himself he is innocent. To tell the truth, that is all he

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feels, his incorrigible innocence. Indeed, this is what allows him everything. Hence, what he demands of himself is to live *solely* with what he knows, to do with what is, and to interject nothing that is not certain. He is told nothing is. But this is at least a certainty. With it, he must deal: he wants to know whether it is possible to live *no esquive*.



Algerian Desert ©John Oswalt

[Suicide vs. Revolt]

Now, I am ready to approach the notion of suicide. One has already sensed what solution might be given. At this point, the problem is reversed. It was previously a matter of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now appears, on the contrary, that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning. To live an experience, a fate, is to accept it fully. Now, no man will want to live a fatal experience, knowing that it is absurd, unless he does everything to keep before him that absurd brought to light by *conscience*.

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To negate one of the terms of the confrontation that keeps the absurd alive is to escape from it. To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. The theme of the permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience. Living is to keep the absurd alive. To keep it alive is above all to face it. Unlike Eurydice, the absurd dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a timeless confrontation of man and his own obscurity. It is insistence on an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every single second. Just as danger provides man the unique opportunity to seize *conscience*, so the metaphysical revolt extends *conscience* to the entire of the experience. Revolt is that constant presence of man to his Self. It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. This revolt is but the certainty of a crushing fate without the resignation that ought to go with it.

This is where we see to what extent the absurd experience differs from suicide. One may think that suicide follows revolt. But it is wrong, for it is not the logical outcome of it. It is exactly its opposite because of the consent it presupposes. Suicide, like the leap, is acceptance to its extreme limit. Everything is consummated and man reintegrates his own history. His future, his sole and dreadful future, he discerns it and blindly rushes toward it. In its way, suicide is a solution to the absurd. It engulfs the absurd into the same death. But I know that in order to keep alive, the absurd cannot be resolved. It escapes suicide to the extent that it is simultaneously *conscience* and rejection of death. It is, at the extreme limit of the condemned man's last thought, that shoe string of which he catches sight, in spite of everything, a few feet away, on the very brink of his dizzying fall. The opposite of the man who dies from his own hands, in fact, is the man condemned to death.

This revolt gives life its value. By its constant presence all the way of a life, revolt restores dignity to it. To a man who has no blinders, there is no greater sight than that of intelligence at grips with reality that transcends him. The vision of human pride cannot be excelled. Any sort of expressions of lesser value will not do. That discipline the mind imposes upon itself, that will forged out of nothing, that

face-to-face struggle have something mighty and unique about them. To impoverish this reality whose inhumanity confers man his dignity is tantamount to impoverishing man himself. I understand then why the doctrines that explain everything to me also weaken me. They relieve me of the weight of my own life, and yet I must carry it alone. At this juncture, I cannot conceive that a skeptical metaphysics will become part of an ethics of renunciation and that they will do well together.

[First Consequence: Revolt in the Face of the Absurd]

Conscience and revolt, these refusals are the opposite of renunciation. Everything irreducible and of passion in a human heart on the contrary quickens them with its own life. The matter is that one must die without being reconciled or consenting. Suicide is a repudiation. The absurd man can only exhaust everything out of all things and exhaust himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by *solitary* effort, for he knows that in *conscience* and that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth: defiance. That is a first consequence.

[Second Consequence: Freedom in a Limited Universe]

If I am to maintain the position I accepted earlier, which consists in drawing all the consequences (and nothing else) the discovery of a notion entails, I am confronted with a second paradox. In order to proceed faithfully according to this method, I can put aside the whole problem of metaphysical freedom...

My concept of freedom can only be that of a prisoner or of a subject in relation to the modern state. The only freedom I know is that of the mind and of action. Namely, if the absurd cancels all possibilities of eternal freedom, on the one hand, it gives back and intensifies

my freedom of action.. The privation of hope and future means an increase in man’s open-ness to the world.

From the reading...

“To be aware of one’s life, one’s revolt, one’s freedom, and so to the maximum, is to live, also to the maximum.”

Before he encounters the absurd, the everyday man lives with goals, is concerned about the future, seeks a reason for being (to whom or for what is not the question). He evaluates his possibilities, he counts on “someday,” on retirement, on the labor of his sons. He still thinks that something in his life gives it a purpose. He truly acts as if he were free, even though all the facts pointedly contradict this freedom. After the absurd experience, everything teeters. This idea that “I am,” the way I go about as if everything had a meaning (even though there are times I have said nothing has)—all that, like in a whirl, turns out to be a lie because of the absurd possibility of death. Thinking of the future, choosing goals, having preferences—all this presupposes a belief in freedom, even though we sometimes maintain that we do not feel it. But specifically, this higher freedom, this freedom *to be* that alone can be the basis for the truth I know does not exist. Death emerges as the only reality. After death, the chips are down. Not only am I no longer free to perpetuate myself, but I am a slave—a slave without hope of an eternal *revolution* and without recourse to contempt. And without a *revolution* and without contempt, who can remain a slave? What freedom can truly exist when there is no assurance of eternity?

[The Absurd Man: Free from Illusions]

But, at the same time, the absurd man realizes that he was living on the illusions of that postulated freedom. In a way, it hampered him. To some extent, as much as he imagined that his life had a pur-

pose, he adapted to the demands it made on him, and he became a slave of his freedom. Therefore, it was impossible that I act otherwise than the father (or the engineer or the leader of a nation, of the Post Office employee) whom I was preparing to be. I believe that I can choose to be that employee rather than doing something else. Surely, I believe it unconsciously. But in the same token my assumption is firmly upheld with the beliefs and the presumptions people around me commonly hold (others are so sure of being free and such a good mood is so contagious!). No matter how hard we try to stay away from having presumptions—they might be social or moral—they constrain us, and with regard to the better of them (there are good and bad presumptions), we may even adapt our lives to them. Thus the absurd man understands that he was not truly free. To state it clearly, insofar as I hope, I am concerned with a truth that could be my own, with a way of being or creating, insofar as I organize my life and prove thereby that I accept it can have a meaning, I set up limits within which my life spreads narrowly. I act like many so-called bureaucrats of the mind or of the heart, who inspire me with only disgust, and who, for all actions, do nothing else—I see it now but taking man's freedom seriously.

[Inner Freedom]

The absurd enlightens one point: there is no tomorrow. Henceforth this is the reason for my inner freedom. I will use two comparisons. Mystics, to begin with, find freedom in self-sacrifice. They offer themselves totally—as a gift to their god, they accept his rules, and so they become secretly free. They find a new inner independence in slavery spontaneously accepted. But what does this freedom mean? It may be said that they *feel* free in relation to themselves and they are not so much free than liberated. Likewise, completely turned toward death (taken here as the most obvious absurdity), the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him. He enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules. We can see at this point how the initial themes of existen-

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tial philosophy keep their entire value. The return to *conscience*, the escape from the sluggishness of daily life represent the first steps of absurd freedom. But it is the existential *preaching* that I have in mind, and with it that spiritual leap which fundamentally escapes *conscience*. In the same way, the slaves of antiquity (this is my other comparison) did not own their own lives. But they knew the freedom that consists in not feeling responsible. Death, too, can have patrician hands which, while crushing, also liberate.

One finds here the principle of a liberation: losing oneself in that abysmal certainty, feeling hence forth like a stranger sufficiently distant from one's own life so as to enlarge it and live it otherwise than with one's short-sightedness for the beloved's weaknesses. Such new independence like any freedom of action is for a limited time. It is not alike a blank check on eternity, but it replaces the illusions of the other freedom which were all ending with death. The divine open-ness of the condemned man for whom the doors of the prison open at dawn on a certain day, this unbelievable detachment from everything except the pure flame of life— one sees that death and the absurd are indeed the principles of the only reasonable freedom: that which a human heart can feel and live. This is the second consequence. The absurd man thus catches sight of a fiery and frigid, transparent and limited universe where nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is void and nothingness. He can then decide whether to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the obstinately enduring evidence of a life without consolation.

But what is the meaning of life in such a universe? Nothing else for the moment but indifference to the future and passion to exhaust all that is given. Belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, preferences. Belief in the absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the opposite. This is worth looking into.

To know whether or not one can live without recourse beyond the human world is all that interests me. I want to stay within these parameters. Given the true face of life, can I adjust to it? Now, opposite to this particular concern, belief in the absurd is tantamount

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to replace the quality of experiences by the quantity. If I convince myself that life has no other aspect than that of the absurd, if I feel that all its stability depends on that forever ending opposition between my conscious revolt and the darkness in which it struggles, if I admit that my freedom has meaning only in relation to human life, then I must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living. It is not for me to ask whether such life style is unrefined or revolting, if it is elegant or sad. Once and for all value judgments are discarded here in favor of factual judgments. I have only to draw the conclusions from what I see and to risk nothing that could be an assumption. Supposing that this way of living were not honest, then true honesty would command me to be dishonest.

From the reading...

"Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences which are my revolt, my freedom and my passion."

Living the fullest life, in a broad sense, that rule means nothing. It needs to be precise. It seems first that the notion of quantity has not been properly explored, for it can account for a large part of the human experience. A man's rule of conduct and his scale of values take their meanings only from the quantity and variety of experiences he accumulates through the possibilities that open up. Now, the conditions of modern life impose on the majority of men the same quantity of experiences and consequently the same profound experience. Of course, we must take into account the individual's instinctive nature, the "givens" in him. But I cannot judge of it. Stating it again, the rule is that I must go on suitably doing with immediately perceived evidence. I see, then, that the specific feature of a common code of ethics lies not so much in the ideal importance of the principles that constitute it as in the norm of an experience that can be calibrated. Stretching the point just a little bit, I see that the Greek had rules of ethics for their leisure just as we have our own

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eight-hour day rules also. But already many men among the most tragic make us foresee that a longer experience changes this table of values. They make us imagine that adventurer of the everyday who through mere quantity of experiences would break all records (I am using purposely a sports expression) and would thus win his own code of ethical behavior.⁵ Yet let's stay away from romanticism and just ask ourselves what such an attitude may mean to a man resolute to take up his bet and to observe strictly what he believes to be the rules of the game.

To break all records means first and foremost to stand in the face of the world as often as possible. How can this be done without contradictions and without playing on words? For on the one hand the absurd teaches that all experiences are indifferent, and on the other hand it drives us to accumulate the foremost quantity of experiences. How, then, can one wishes to do otherwise than so many of the men I was speaking earlier--choose the life style that possibly brings the most of that human stuff, thereby introducing a scale of values that on the other hand one claims to reject?

But again it is the absurd and its contradictions that informs us. For the error is to think that this quantity of experiences depends on the circumstances of our life when it depends solely on us. Here we must be simple. To two men living the same number of years, the world makes available to each the same sum of experiences. It is up to us to be conscious of them. To be aware of one's life, one's revolt, one's freedom, and so to the maximum, is to live, also to the maximum. Where lucidity is the rule, the scale of values becomes useless. Let's make things even simpler. Let us say that the only obstacle, "the loss of living," is premature death. The universe that is suggested here lives solely by opposition to the persistent exception that death is. Thus no depth, no emotion, no passion, nor any sac-

5. There are times when quantity makes up quality. If I lend credence to the most recently updated scientific theories, all matter is constituted by centers of energy. Their greater or lesser quantity makes its specificity more or less unique. A billion ions and one ion differ not only in quantity but also in quality. It is easy to find an analogy in human experience.

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rifice could render equal to the eyes of the absurd man (even if he wished it so) a conscious life of forty years and a lucidity spread on sixty years. Madness and death are incorrigible. Man does not choose. The absurd and the extra life it takes *therefore do not depend on man's will*, but on its contrary, which is death. Weighing words carefully, one can say that it is altogether a matter of luck. One only has to be able to consent to it. Twenty years of a life and experiences will never be possibly compensated.

But again it is the absurd and the contradictions that sustain it which inform us. For the error is to think that this quantity of experiences depends on the circumstances of our life whereas it depends solely on us. Here we must be simple. To two men living the same number of years, the world provides always to each the same sum of experiences. It is up to us to be conscious of it. To feel the pulse of one's life, one's revolt, one's freedom, and to the maximum, is to live to the maximum. Where lucidity is the rule, the scale of values becomes useless. Let's make things even simpler. Let us say that the only obstacle, "the loss of earnings" suffered over the years is in premature death. The universe suggested here lives only in regard to its contradiction to the persistent exception of death. Thus no depth, no emotion, no passion, nor any sacrifice could render equal to the eyes of the absurd man (even if he wished it so) a conscious life of forty years and a lucidity spread on sixty years.⁶ Madness and death are incorrigibly within the absurd. Man makes no choice. The absurd and the effort for living it requires therefore do not depend on man's will, but on its contrary, which is death.⁷ Weighing words carefully, one can say that it is altogether a matter of luck. One must only be able to consent to it. Twenty years of a life and experiences

6. Same reflection on a notion as different as the idea of nothingness. It neither adds to nor subtracts anything from reality. In the psychological experience of nothingness, it is the consideration of what will happen in two thousand years that our own nothingness truly takes its meaning. In one of its aspects, nothingness is made up exactly of the sum of lives to come which will not be ours.

7. The will is only the agent here: it tends to maintain conscience. It provides a discipline of life, which is appreciable.

will never be possibly compensated.

There was an odd inconsistency among such learned groups of men as the Greeks: They claimed that those who died young were beloved by the Gods. And that is true only if we are willing to admit that entering the ludicrous world of the gods is forever to lose the purest of all joys, which is feeling, moreover is feeling on this earth. The present and the succession of present moments in the face of a conscious soul—that is the ideal of the absurd man. But the word “ideal” rings false in this context. It is not really his vocation; it is more exactly the third consequence of his reasoning. Beginning with an anguished conscience of the inhuman, the meditation on the absurd returns at the end of its course to the very heart of the passionate flames of human revolt.⁸

[Third Consequence]

Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences: my revolt, my freedom and my passion. Through the mere activity of *conscience*, I change into a rule of life what was an invitation to death--and I refuse suicide. Surely, I know of the inner rumbling that vibrates throughout these days. Of it, I will only say these words: It is necessary. When Nietzsche writes: “It clearly appears that the main thing in heaven and on earth is to obey for a long time and in the same direction; in a long run there results something for which it is worth the trouble of living on this earth as, for examples, virtue, art, music, dance, reason, mind—something that transfigures, something that is refined, that is mad or divine,” he states with clarity the basic rule of a high-fashioned ethics. But he also points the absurd man’s path.

8. What matters is coherence. We start out from consent to the world. But Oriental thought teaches that one can indulge in the same effort of logic by choosing against the world. That is just as legitimate and gives this essay its perspectives and its limits. But when the negation of the world is pursued just with the same logical rigor, one often reaches (in certain Vedantic schools) similar results regarding, for instance, the indifference of works. In a book of great importance, *Le Choix*, Jean Grenier uses this rationale to develop a real “philosophy of indifference.”

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Obeying to the burning flames of the absurd is both the easiest and the most difficult thing to do. However, it is good for man to measure himself against difficulties as a means to judge himself now and then. He, alone, can do so.

"Prayer," says Alain, "is when night descends on thought." "But the mind must meet the night," reply the mystics and the existentialists. Yes, indeed, but not that night born of man's will, his eyes closed—dark and impenetrable night that the mind conjures in order to lose itself in it. If it must encounter a night, let it be the one of despair that stays lucid—polar night, vigil of the mind, whence will arise perhaps that white and intact brightness which outlines each object in the light of intelligence. At this point, equivalence encounters man's passion for understanding. Then it no longer matters whether to judge the existential leap. It resumes its place amid the century-old fresco of human attitudes. For the spectator, if he is conscious, that leap is still absurd. Insofar as he thinks he is solving the paradox, he reinstates it entirely. In this light, it is touching. In this light, everything resumes its place and the absurd world is reborn in all its splendor and its diversity.



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Related Ideas

Solitaire et Solidaire (<http://www.spikemagazine.com/0397camu.htm>)

Spike Magazine—interview by Russell Wilkinson with Catherine Camus about her father’s book *The First Man*, a work first published in 1995, composed of the unedited and unfinished manuscript found in the car crash in which Camus was tragically killed in 1960. If you like, you can practice your French translation skills for this interview at this location: *Solitaire et Solidaire*. (<http://www.spikemagazine.com/0899camu.htm>)

Difficult Choices for France’s Most Reluctant Existentialist (http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m1571/n8_v14/20351800/p1/article.jhtml) Roger Kaplan’s article on Camus’s enduring appeal from *Insight Magazine*—a brief overview of Camus’s outlook for beginners.

Albert Camus—Links (www.littlebluelight.com/lblphp/links.php?ikey=3). *Little Blue Light*. Excellent list of Camus links for works, quotes, articles, and book reviews.

Albert Camus. *The Plague*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. Vintage Books, 1991.

Motion Picture and Video: *The Plague*, directed by Luis Puenzo, 1993. Cast: William Hurt, Robert Duvall, and Raul Julia. The film is based on Albert Camus’s *La Peste*. Rated R; 1 hour, 45 minutes (video 1 hour, 5 minutes).

Literary Outlaw (<http://inch.com/~ari/ac1.html>) (*Photographs of Albert Camus*). Copyrighted (and hence seldom seen) photographs scanned by Ari Frankel from photographs in the Herbert R. Lottman biography of Camus.

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BBCi—Books by Author (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/books/author/camus/>) *Albert Camus*. Three page biography of Camus.

Nobel eMuseum (<http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1957/camus-speech.html>) *Albert Camus—Banquet Speech*. Albert Camus’s speech at the Nobel Banquet in Stockholm, December 10, 1957.

From the reading ...

“These are the truths the heart can feel; yet they must be examined in depth to become clear to the mind.”



Translator Hélène Brown at Camus’s Graveside Lourmarin Cemetery

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Camus writes, “Awareness of the absurd, when we first claim to deduce a rule of behavior from it, makes murder seem a matter of indifference. . . . If we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance.”⁹ How does Camus develop the awareness of the absurd as an affirmative moral principle of humanistic insight?
2. Camus’s insight that the world of nature has no human purpose and is not the sustainer of human design and goals indicates that human beings cannot dedicate their lives to obtaining any permanent and lasting accomplishment. How do you think Camus would assess the idealist individuals who dedicate their lives to “make a difference” or to “contribute to mankind’s betterment”?
3. The classical conception of ethics is often expressed in terms of Aristotle’s phrase of the life of excellence or “living well and doing well in the world.” Explain whether or not you believe that Camus’s philosophy makes such a life possible or whether or not such an effort would lead to an inauthentic lifestyle.
4. At several points in the reading, Camus expresses the view that “facing existence with lucidity” where we clearly and distinctly confront the objective, the mechanical, and the trivial gestures of everyday life. In such a moment, he says he is speaking of “honesty.” How does this lucidity differ from the clarity claimed by objective or scientific understanding of the world? Compare Bertrand Russell’s notion of knowledge as the union of the soul and the Not-self. Is Camus’s antimony, Russell’s knowledge?
5. Discuss Camus’s of the authentic person with Jung’s description of individuation: “It is the individual’s task to differentiate

9. Albert Camus. *The Rebel*. Vintage, 1956, 5.

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himself from all the others and stand on his own feet. All collective identities... interfere with the fulfillment of this task. Such collective identities are crutches for the lame, shields for the timid, beds for the lazy, nurseries for the irresponsible. . . ”¹⁰

10. C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*.

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